

CRS Report for Congress

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U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a significant role in U.S. military operations. The Administration has given U.S. SOF forces greater responsibility for planning and directing worldwide counterterrorism operations. The Administration's proposed FY2004 defense budget requests about \$6.7 billion for SOF forces – an increase of about 34% over FY2003 – and proposes increasing the total number of SOF personnel. The expanded use of SOF in U.S. military operations raises several issues for Congress. The House and Senate Armed Services Committees, in their reports on the FY2004 Defense Authorization Bill (H.R. 1588/S. 1050) included several provisions relating to U.S. SOF. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Background

Overview. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are small, elite military units with special training and equipment that can infiltrate into hostile territory through land, sea, or air to conduct a variety of operations, many of them classified. SOF personnel undergo rigorous selection and lengthy, specialized training. U.S. SOF units total roughly 47,000 active and reserve personnel in the Army, Navy, and Air Force, or about 2% of all U.S. active and reserve forces. The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) oversees the training, doctrine, and equipping of all U.S. SOF units.

Operations in Iraq. SOF operations in Iraq are currently focusing on capturing or killing “high-value targets”- an alleged euphemism for senior former Hussein regime members - combating the growing insurgency threat, and a wide range of civil-military and psychological operations. According to press reports, Task Force 20, a unit consisting of about 750-1,500 troops drawn from a variety of USSOCOM units are spearheading the hunt for former regime members.¹ Task Force 20, which reportedly was previously involved in the search for weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, is believed to have conducted numerous raids in and around Baghdad and Tirkat. Other

¹ Shadowy U.S. Task Force 20 Stalks Saddam in Iraq, Will Dunham, *Reuters*, August 7, 2003.

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USSOCOM units in Iraq are involved in a wide variety of missions designed to defeat Iraqi insurgents, train a new Iraqi army and security forces, as well as traditional civil-military and psychological operations designed to bring stability to Iraq.

Operations in Afghanistan and Other Countries. SOF continues to operate in Afghanistan where they are involved in counterinsurgency operations and continue their hunt for Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership. SOF are also deployed in the Philippines and Colombia where they are involved in training those country's armed forces in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. SOF is also reportedly deployed with Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Horn of Africa as part of the global war on terrorism.

SOF and Defense Transformation. The Administration considers the enhancement of SOF capabilities to be a key element of its plan for transforming the U.S. military to meet future military challenges. DOD leaders and other officials view the highly effective use of SOF units in Iraq and Afghanistan as a validation of some of the Administration's transformation proposals.²

Authority for Planning Operations. In January 2003, DOD gave USSOCOM greater responsibility for planning and directing worldwide counterterrorism operations. Instead of being simply a supporting command that provides forces to other regional U.S. combatant commanders, USSOCOM will now be a supported command capable of planning and conducting operations in its own right.³

Funding. The Administration's proposed FY2004 defense budget requests about \$6.7 billion for SOF forces (an increase of about 34% over the FY2003 figure), and proposes increasing the total number of U.S. SOF personnel by 2,653. The budget increase would fund, among other things, the additional SOF personnel and improvements to the fleet of aircraft used to support SOF operations. Most of the additional personnel are to be used to improve USSOCOM's ability to plan and direct counterterrorism operations. Some additional personnel will be authorized for civil affairs, psychological operations, and SOF aviation units and also for operational units. Navy officials reportedly will add the equivalent of two SEAL teams over the next five years to bolster their operational capability.⁴

SOF Capabilities. Specific U.S. SOF capabilities include the following:

- **Direct Action.** Short-duration, small-scale offensive actions such as raids, ambushes, hostage rescues, and "surgical strikes."

² For more on transformation of U.S. military forces, see CRS Report RS20787, *Army Transformation and Modernization: Overview and Issues for Congress*, by Edward F. Bruner; CRS Report RS20859, *Air Force Transformation: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Christopher Bolkcom; and CRS Report RS20851, *Naval Transformation: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

³ Morris, Jefferson. SOCOM Changing From 'Supporting' To 'Supported' Command, Official Says. *Aerospace Daily*, April 2, 2003; Scarborough, Rowan. 'Special Ops' Gets OK TO Initiate Its Own Missions. *Washington Times*, January 8, 2003: 8; Scarborough, Rowan. Rumsfeld Bolsters Special Forces. *Washington Times*, January 6, 2003: 1.

⁴ Navy Confirms the Addition of 272 New SEAL Slots, Matthew Dolan, *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, June 13, 2003.

- **Strategic (Special) Reconnaissance.** Clandestine operations in hostile territory to gain significant information.
- **Unconventional Warfare.** Advising and supporting indigenous insurgent and resistance groups operating in the territory of a common enemy. (For example, the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.)
- **Foreign Internal Defense.** Assisting host nation military capabilities to forestall or defeat insurgent activities.
- **Civil Affairs.** Promoting civil-military cooperation between U.S. military forces and the foreign governments and populations.
- **Psychological Operations.** Influencing the attitudes and behavior of relevant populations to assist in accomplishing security missions.
- **Humanitarian Assistance.** Providing various rudimentary services to foreign populations in adverse circumstances.
- **Theater Search and Rescue.** Finding and recovering downed pilots and air crews, sometimes in combat or clandestine situations.
- **Counterterrorism (CT).** Operations conducted to preempt terrorist incidents abroad and activities to assist or work with other CT-designated agencies in the United States.
- Such other activities as the President or Secretary of Defense specify.

Command Structures. Congress in 1986 expressed concern for the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning and passed measures to strengthen its position. These actions included the establishment of USSOCOM as a new unified command. USSOCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL. The Commander of USSOCOM, is a four-star officer who may be from any service. Commander, USSOCOM reports directly to the Secretary of Defense, although an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) provides immediate civilian oversight over many USSOCOM activities. Although Commander, USSOCOM may command SOF operations anywhere – when specifically directed by the Secretary of Defense – it is more normal for him to organize and provide SOF to fight under the command of a regional combatant commander. U.S. military operations in and around Afghanistan are conducted by the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM). Commander, USCENTCOM, whose primary headquarters coincidentally is also at MacDill AFB, has a permanent SOF subordinate command known as SOCCENT.

Army Special Operations Forces.⁵ U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) include 26,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve who are organized into Special Forces units, Rangers units, special operations aviation units, civil affairs units, psychological operations units, and special operations support units. ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Bragg, NC. Five active Special Forces Groups (Airborne) are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Campbell, KY, and Fort Carson, CO. Special Forces soldiers – also known as the Green Berets – are trained in various skills, including foreign languages, that allow teams to operate independently in designated regions of the world. Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered

⁵ Information in this section was taken from Brown, Bryan (Doug). "U.S. Army Special Operations: Focusing on People – Humans are More Important than Hardware." *Army*, October 2001: 157-162.

in Utah and Alabama. An elite light airborne infantry unit, the 75th Ranger Regiment, is headquartered at Fort Benning, GA and consists of three battalions specializing in direct action operations. Army special operations aviation units, including the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) at Fort Campbell, KY, feature pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the harshest environments, day or night and in adverse weather.

The most frequently deployed SOF assets are civil affairs (CA) units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help administer civilian affairs in the theater. The 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) is the only active CA unit; all other CA units reside in four Army Reserve Civil Affairs Commands located in Pensacola, FL, Mountain View, CA, Riverdale, MD, and Bronx, NY. Psychological operations units disseminate information to large foreign audiences through mass media. The 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Bragg, and two Army Reserve groups are located in Cleveland, OH, and at Moffett Federal Airfield, CA. Finally, Fort Bragg is also home to specialized supporting units and Special Mission Units that support a variety of ARSOF and joint missions. Notable among these is the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, often called Delta Force, which reportedly is based at Fort Bragg.

Air Force Special Operations Forces.⁶ The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 10,000 active and reserve personnel, of which about 22% are stationed overseas. AFSOC is headquartered at Hurlburt Field, FL, which is also the home of most of AFSOC's active units, including the 16th Special Operations Wing, the 720th Special Tactics Group, the 18th Flight Test Squadron, and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. The 352nd Special Operations Group is at RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 353rd Special Operations Group, is at Kadena Air Base, Japan. Reserve AFSOC components include the 193rd Special Operations Wing, Air National Guard stationed at Harrisburg, PA, the 280th Combat Communications Squadron, Air National Guard stationed at Dothan, AL., and the 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve stationed at Duke Field, FL. AFSOC's three active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft. The V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, a Marine Corps priority, is also being developed for AFSOC. If procured, SOF CV-22s will conduct long-range vertical takeoff and landing infiltration, exfiltration and resupply missions.

Naval Special Operations Forces. The Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC) is located in Coronado, CA, and includes about 4,950 active and almost 1,200 reserve personnel. Navy special warfare forces are organized into SEAL teams (SEAL stands for Sea, Air and Land), Special Boat Units (SBUs), and SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) teams based on both coasts. SEALs are considered the best-trained combat swimmers in the world, and can be deployed covertly from submarines or from sea-based aircraft. Although Afghanistan is a landlocked country hundreds of miles from shore, SEALs formed a significant portion of the total U.S. SOF presence in Afghanistan.⁷

⁶ For additional information on Air Force SOF units, see Wall, Robert. Conflict Could Test Special Ops Improvements. *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, October 1, 2001: 30.

⁷ Sources for information in this section: Waterborne Commandos. *Armed Forces Journal* (continued...)

Until recently, the Marine Corps had no SOF units. In December 2002, the Marine Corps announced that it had created an 86-man SOF unit called the Marine Corps SOCOM Detachment. The unit was formed as a 2-year pilot project and will be based at Camp Pendleton, CA. It was scheduled to begin training in June 2003, to join USSOCOM in October 2003, and to be ready for deployment (with SEAL teams) in April 2004. If the unit is deemed successful, it may be expanded or duplicated.⁸ In addition, Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs), which contain roughly 2,100 Marines, for many years have received training in specific special operations prior to deploying, in which case they are certified as special-operations-capable (SOC) for the duration of their deployment and are referred to as MEU(SOC)s.

Issues for Congress

Potential issues for Congress include the following:

- **Congressional restriction on the use of SOF.** According to press reports⁹ a classified Senate report accompanying S. 1025, Intelligence Authorization Act for FY 2004, would require DOD to first obtain a presidential finding or directive before deploying SOF forces on some clandestine missions to countries where the U.S. role is not publically acknowledged. The House version, H.R. 2417, does not contain similar provisions. Many critics of this measure believe that such a requirement would have a detrimental impact on the war on terrorism and limit SOF's ability to kill or capture terrorists. Congress may wish to consider the impact of this proposed restriction on current and future SOF operations.
- **Role of SOF in war on terrorism.** What is the proper overall role of SOF forces in the global war on terrorism? What are the potential operational, legal, and diplomatic advantages and disadvantages of having USSOCOM exercise direct control over major portions of the military effort in the overall U.S. war on terrorism?
- **SOF size and funding.** Are SOF units adequately sized and funded? How many additional SOF personnel, and how much additional funding, are needed to support USSOCOM's expanded role in the global war on terrorism? Given the very high standards of selection and training for

⁷ (...continued)

International, January 2000: 31-33 (an interview with Rear Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command); Gourley, Scott R. Setting The Seal On Maritime Special Operations Forces. *Jane's Navy International*, June 1999: 18-21, 23. See also, Worthington, George. Whither Naval Special Warfare? *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, January 1996: 61-63; Nolan, Mary I. Warriors Who Come From the Sea. *Sea Power*, February 1995: 38-40; Waller, Douglas C. Hell Week. *Newsweek*, January 10, 1994: 28-33.

⁸ Steele, Jeanette. Marines Plan Special-Ops Unit. *San Diego Union-Tribune*. December 19, 2002; Lowe, Christian. Marine Corps To Activate Special Operations Force. *MarineCorpsTimes.com*, December 17, 2002.

⁹ Sources for information in this section: Congress to Restrict the use of Special Ops, Bill Gertz, *Washington Times*, August 13, 2003 and Covert-Action Curbs Fought by Pentagon, Bill Gertz, *Washington Times*, August 14, 2003.

SOF personnel, how difficult will it be to increase the size of USSOCOM?

- **SOF and defense transformation.** What does recent experience with SOF in Afghanistan and elsewhere reveal concerning possible directions for transforming conventional U.S. military forces, particularly land forces?
- **SOF operational tempo.** With significant numbers of SOF personnel currently deployed overseas, some observers are concerned that SOF forces are being stretched too thin. How does the use of significant numbers of SOF forces in Iraq affect USSOCOM's ability to meet demands for SOF in Afghanistan and elsewhere?

Legislative Activity

FY2004 Defense Authorization Bill (H.R. 1588/S. 1050). In its report (H.Rept. 108-106 of May 16, 2003) on H.R. 1588, the **House Armed Services Committee** recommended funding increases for several SOF-related programs (see, for example, pages 50, 122, 123, 191-192, 233, 241, and 249). The committee lauded U.S. SOF, expressed support for increased spending on SOF, noted its own recommended SOF funding increases, supported increasing the number of SOF personnel, concurred with SOF leaders that such increases must not compromise SOF personnel standards, supported DOD's decision to designate USSOCOM as a supported command in some cases, expressed concern that the existing language of 10 U.S.C. 167 relating to this issue may be too restrictive to permit the timely execution of some missions to be performed by SOF, and directed DOD to review the issue and report by February 1, 2004 on whether any changes are needed (pages 355-356).

In its report (S.Rept. 108-46 of May 13, 2003) on S. 1050, the **Senate Armed Services Committee** recommended funding increases for several SOF-related programs (see, for example, pages 3, 38, 115, 116-118, and 237-239). The committee noted problems that have occurred in a program to acquire a miniature submarine to be used by SOF forces called the Advanced SEAL delivery system (ASDS). The committee recommended a reduction in advanced procurement funding for the program and directed DOD to review the program's acquisition strategy, particularly with regard to maximizing the benefits of competition (pages 115-116). The committee included a provision (Section 341) regarding reimbursement of pay and allowances of certain reserve SOF personnel who are called to active duty (page 292). The committee supported DOD's decisions to expand USSOCOM's role in the war on terrorism, to make USSOCOM a supported command in some cases, and to request increased funding for SOF. The committee stated that it needed more information on how DOD's decisions on these matters would affect USSOCOM's nine existing statutory missions and that it was concerned that these decisions be implemented within the parameters of existing international law, with full executive and legislative oversight. The committee included a provision (Section 923) directing DOD to report on these issues within 180 days (pages 353-354).